

VZCZCXRO6243
PP RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHDK #0257/01 0610702
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 020702Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY DAKAR
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1958
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLMC/MCC WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DAKAR 000257

DEPT FOR AF/W, AF/EPS, AF/RSA, DRL
PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

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SUBJECT: SENEGAL: CONTENTIOUS LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE CASAMANCE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: In the run-up to the March 2009 local elections, POL Assistant met with authorities and NGO representatives in Ziguinchor to discuss local politics and the state of the peace process between the government and the Movement of Democratic Forces in the Casamance (MFDC). The upcoming local elections are seen by many as a good opportunity to vote for those candidates whom they hope can end a 26-year long conflict and bring peace and prosperity to the region. End summary.

MASS CONFUSION AND LEGAL QUESTIONS

¶2. (SBU) January 20, 2009 was the last day for all political parties to send their lists to the local government in order to be eligible to compete in the March 22 election. However, in some areas the ruling Democratic Party of Senegal (PDS) did not respect this injunction and some of their lists were registered well after the 23:00 deadline had passed. In addition, the creation of three new regions, one of which is the new region of Sedhiou, which used to be part of the Ziguinchor region, has been the source of much confusion and frustration as many candidates complained that they did not know or were not made aware of where they needed to register for the elections. Furthermore, the region is rife with rumors that foreigners from Guinea-Bissau and Guinea-Conakry received Senegalese birth certificates that in turn allow them to register to vote.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE SOUTH

¶3. (SBU) Currently, the three major parties vying for power in the Casamance are: the PDS with its leaders Abdoulaye Balde, the Secretary-General of the Presidency, Innocence Ntab, the Minister of Labor and Christian Diatta, the Minister of Bio Fuels, Renewable Energy and Scientific Research; the "Taku Defar Senegal" coalition lead by incumbent Ziguinchor Mayor Robert Sagna, and the Benno Siggil Senegaal coalition of opposition parties.

¶4. (SBU) Contacts say that Sagna has the advantage of having very good relations with "Les Notables" (elderly people with influence). They underlined his reputation as a person who runs his affairs discretely without much fanfare and who makes sure to attend familial ceremonies or send his representatives. Sagna is a Catholic and he belongs to the "Joola" ethnic group, which makes up about 60 percent of the local population. Contacts said, "Should the PDS list be perceived to be weak they could easily lose the elections to Sagna." The PDS list is headed by Abdoulaye Balde, a close ally of Presidential scion, Karim Wade. According to the same contacts, Balde seems to have the support of the youth and women. Balde has also brought a sizeable war chest with which to "buy" the sympathies of the population and he has the backing of the state. However, he will face some challenges to overcome the fact that he is from the Peul ethnic group associated with Kolda rather than Ziguinchor and he is said to be a rather uncharismatic and not very eloquent speaker.

¶5. (SBU) Meanwhile, in the district of Oussouye, the PDS may have

some problems after Minister Diatta selected unfamiliar people to run on the party's list, leaving out charismatic and popular local candidates such as Ms. Emily Diatta, a well known parliamentarian, and Demba Diagne, the President of the Regional Council. According to a senior PDS Councilor, President Wade's promotion of Innocence Ntap to Minister of State has been a source of contention locally. Currently Balde and Ntap are in a battle royal to control the PDS in the region. Many PDS members acknowledged that their party could lose the elections if Balde and Ntap do not set aside their differences, "Our party must overcome individual interests to focus more on unity to bring peace back to the region. If not, the opposition will win in Ziguinchor."

PEACE PROCESS TALKS ARE UNDERWAY

16. (SBU) Several contacts confirmed that the peace talks are still underway with the assistance of political parties, local and military authorities, opinion and religious leaders, NGOs, and representatives of the MFDC. However, a perception that the government has distributed more money to some rebels than to others has raised tensions among the different guerilla groups. Contacts noted that the death of Abb Diamacoune (the former MFDC liaison) weakened the MFDC and led to the creation of five new political groups and three military factions who are in a permanent state of conflict over the control of the MFDC's guerillas in the bush. Currently, the MFDC's military branch includes a northern one led by Salif Sadio and southern one led by Atou Badiate.

17. (SBU) A potential Self Help grantee who lives in the bush and who has firsthand experience with the conflict confirmed that the government does not want to use the army against the rebels, even though they have the means and the capabilities to do so if so ordered. He added that, if the government implements a comprehensive demining plan, such as the one that Handicap International is carrying out, the rebels would be more than willing

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to return to their fields and grow crops instead of trying to make money by attacking bush taxis and robbing passengers, "at this point, it's about money and opportunity. If the government can create jobs and build a solid infrastructure, then the rebels would be willing to listen."

COMMENT

18. (SBU) Most political observers point to Ziguinchor as a city to watch during the election as two heavyweights are pitted against one another. Internal divisions within the PDS and a strong and popular incumbent make it difficult to predict who will be the next Mayor of this pivotal city, but whoever he is, he will have some major challenges to rehabilitate this conflict-weary region.
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